Special Issue On New York's School Crisis

The Verdict Of A Long And Patient Investigation

"The New York City schools have failed in ghetto areas, in most desegregated communities, and in many white ones as well. One out of three pupils in the system is a year or more retarded in reading and arithmetic . . . Public education was for previous ethnic groups a prime means for social mobility, but for the Negro it tends to block mobility and to increase socio-economic and racial segregation."

—David Rogers, 110 Livingston Street: Politics and Bureaucracy in the New York City School System, *p. 473 (Random House, $8.95). We recommend it highly.*

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The Mason-Dixon Line Moves to New York

On my way into New York City from La Guardia, the taxi driver told me his daughter after a first year as teacher in a black ghetto had transferred out to Long Island in despair. "The children were wonderful," he said. "The trouble was the parents." An hour later at lunch a Jewish school teacher from Brooklyn complained of the black children in her mathematics class for slow learners but said the black parents, when she called on them for help, were without exception not only cooperative but grateful. But teacher and taxi-driver agreed in blaming Mayor Lindsay, though just for what was not clear. Indeed very little in New York's crisis is clear, perhaps because the real motivations are kept hidden as shameful. More and more people, particularly among the striking teachers, and in the Jewish community, are flailing about in hysteria. A sample: I asked the Brooklyn schoolteacher just what was the issue in the strike. She replied with appalling simplicity, "Anti-Semitism." How do you win a strike against anti-Semitism? By circumcising all gentiles and turning Black Muslims into Black Jews? "What does Mr. Shanker want," the Mayor asked in a similar vein in a radio interview next day, "For the police vans to come into the [Ocean Hill-Brownsville] community, arrest them and send them to New Jersey?" Is the Exodus to be re-enacted, this time with a black cast?

A Genius With Two Heads

The plain truth is that John V. Lindsay is in trouble because he suddenly finds himself the Mayor of a Southern town. The Mason-Dixon line has moved north, and the Old Confederacy has expanded to the outer reaches of the Bronx. Even without this tide of racism, it would take a genius with two heads to govern the city successfully. Some of its basic problems are universal. One is size. Another is bureaucracy; the educational bureaucracy has entrenched itself in a maze of regulations beyond effective public control. A third is poverty; by next year one of every eight New Yorkers will be on relief. The city is choked with automobiles and people. Even if all eight million were a multiple birth from the same mamma, they would aggravate the hell out of each other. But in New York as elsewhere those of a different color, whether black or Puerto Rican, are no longer willing to accept second or third class citizenship submissively. They are pushing upwards into the better jobs and the sunnier places. In New York, the country's, and the world's biggest Jewish city, this has created a special problem—a confrontation between blacks and Jews. This is rapidly turning Lindsay into the world's most downtrodden WASP.

The defeat two years ago of his proposal for a civilian review board to hear complaints against the police was the first disturbing signal in what had been the most liberal city in the country. New York's lower middle class whites were reacting like their counterparts elsewhere. In the struggle over schools the fears have now spread to liberal teachers hitherto sympathetic to the civil rights movement. Conflicts in the ghetto with Jewish landlords and storekeepers were relatively easy to contain. But the teachers' strike has churned up fears in an educational establishment that Jewish teachers and principals have dominated for a generation. Now that black unrest seems to threaten union standards and their jobs they are reacting like less liberal and less intellectual "ethnic" groups. The Teachers' Union is moving

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The Stepchildren of The System

"All the pathologies of the system get played out most dramatically in the ghetto schools. Teachers and principals, as well as pupils and the wider community, are beaten down and demoralized by experiences there.

"The PEA [Public Education Association] study of 1955 and the Urban League Study of 1963 showed that ghetto schools got fewer services than the others in New York City. The recent Sheldon-Glazier fact book, *Pupils and Schools in New York City,* documents this with references to staffing. Only 8% of the Negro-Puerto Rican segregated elementary schools had more than 65% regularly licensed teachers, while 68% of the segregated white elementary schools did. While ghetto schools have many more compensatory programs and more expenditures per pupil than segregated white schools, the bureaucracy prevents the coherent, integrated use of these 'special services,' as extra teachers and staff don't understand each others' role and the fragmentation is even worse than before. In New York City, compensatory programs for ghetto schools usually mean more of the same."

—110 Livingston Street *by David Rogers, p. 277.*

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closer to the benighted old-line A.F. of L. craft unions. A formidable anti-black coalition is shaping up. One of its victims may be the good name of the Jewish community.

If this great city is to be saved from race war, more Jewish intellectuals are going to have to speak up in ways that their own people will resent, just as white southerners resented those who spoke up for the Negro. The Teachers Union is exaggerating, amplifying and circulating any bit of anti-Semitic drivel it can pick up from any far-out black extremist, however unrepresentative, and using this to drive the Jewish community of New York into a panic. Albert Shanker and the Teachers Union are exploiting natural Jewish fears of anti-Semitism in order to win the community's support for the strike and for its major objective, which is to prevent effective decentralization and community control of the school system. Unless more Jewish leaders speak up in public and say what they do in private, this manufactured hysteria may prove a disaster for both the black and the Jewish communities. Peoples, like Generals, tend to be obsessed by their last war. To hear some New York Jews talk one would think the America of 1968 was the Germany of 1932. They do not see that they themselves are caught up in the backlash which is creating in Wallace the nearest American counterpart to Der Fuehrer, that they are joining the red-necks, that the danger lies in white racism not black. The latter is despairing and defensive; the former holds the potential of a new Nazism in its effort to maintain white supremacy. It would be eternally disgraceful were Jews this time to be among the Brown Shirts.

A Visit to Ocean Hill-Brownsville

To visit the black controlled schools which have stirred such forebodings on both sides of the controversy is like waking from a nightmare. I spent Friday, Oct. 25, in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district, observing classes and talking with teachers and principals in JHS 271 and its intermediate school neighbor, IS 55, and the visit was therapeutic. It was a day without pickets and I saw only one policeman. The atmosphere was incredibly different from what I had been led to expect. I found black and white teachers, Jewish and gentile, working together not just peacefully but with zest and comradeship. The cleanliness and the neat clothing of the children reflected well on the homes from which they came. The classes were orderly. There was none of that screaming, by teacher against pupil, and among the children, which is common in most New York schools. I felt at the end of the day that the racial and union issues were terribly overblown and that the real concern within the embattled district was simply to create effective schools. I saw no reason why this could not be reconciled with proper union standards and I felt it would be a tragedy if this experiment in community control were shut down.

I watched a Mrs. Naomi Levinson teach an English class full of eager black children. I read some of the touching poems and essays they had produced. "It's the first time in my eight years as a teacher," she told us proudly, "that I have been allowed to use unconventional teaching methods." I talked with another teacher, Leon Goodman, whose face lit up with pleasure when he explained the new methods of teaching science he was allowed to apply. "We get them to think rather than simply to copy down abstractions from the blackboard." Both impatiently denied that they had encountered any anti-Semitism.* I sat in on a teacher-team conference of five English teachers, three black, two white, one of the whites a delicate-featured blonde WASP, the other an intense and dark-eyed Jew. The two whites were volunteers. One of them had brought a bongo drum into the classroom to use with the reading of Vachel Lindsay's incomparably rhythmic "Congo" as a way to awaken the children to the wonders of poetry. The atmosphere of this mixed group was wholly devoid of any racial self-consciousness or tension. One felt their pleasure in working together. In the corner of one classroom we watched a young black teacher with a group of children who took turns at reading "The Prince and the Pauper". On the blackboard was the assignment, "Write a story about something that went wrong in a person's life" and next to it in a row there were the helpful hints, "No money. Sickness. No food. No light. No home. No friends. No job." The words telescoped the familiar annals of the ghetto.

The only racialism, if it can be called that, was in the evidence of efforts to awaken black pride. There were some vivid water colors produced in a new painting class and exhibited in a hallway as "Soul on Paper". Another hallway blackboard had "Black Is Beautiful" written not only in French and Spanish but in Greek, Hebrew, Punjabi, Swahili, Arabic and Esperanto. One room's walls were covered with pictures and clippings variously headed "Religion, Statesmen, Musicians, Scientists, Inventors, Diplomats" showing black achievement in these fields.

In the classroom where Leslie Campbell in an African gown over his normal clothes teaches Afro-American studies there were posters showing "Our Homeland" and "Our Proud and Glorious Past". They reminded me of Zionist posters in many Jewish Sabbath schools. There were also posters of "The Proud Look" and "Black Pictures of Christ." Campbell after class was friendly and open. He described himself as a black nationalist revolutionary but said he found himself very much in a minority on the faculty. "Most of my black colleagues," he said, "are simply educationists" though they agree on African studies for its psychological value. The other teacher of Afro-American Studies at JHS 271, Alan Kellock, turned out to be a young white man who has studied in Egypt and Ghana and is finishing a doctorate in African history for the University of Wisconsin. He said he had encountered no racial prejudice

How Few Negro Teachers in New York

"There is no greater indictment as to its [New York's] racism than to contrast the number of Negro teachers to white teachers in cities like Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago, where the percentage ranges from 25% to 40% as against New York City where the percentage is approximately 9% to 10%."

—Richard Parrish, UFT Assistant Treasurer, Vice President, and a founder and treasurer of the Negro American Labor Council, The United Teacher, *10/7.*

How Teacher Attitudes Affect The Child

"The 'disadvantaged' child is a Negro-American, a Mexican-American, a Puerto Rican or any other child who lives in conditions of poverty. He is a lower class child who performs poorly in an educational system that is staffed almost entirely by middle-class teachers . . . [It may be] that the child does poorly in school because that is what is expected of him . . . We have explored the effect of teacher expectations with experiments in which teachers were led to believe that certain of their pupils could be expected to show considerable academic improvement. The teachers thought the predictions were based on tests . . . In actuality the children designated as potential 'spurters' had been chosen at random . . . Nevertheless intelligence tests given after the experiment had been in progress for several months indicated that on the whole the randomly chosen children had improved more than the rest . . . In our experiment nothing was done directly for the child . . . The only people affected directly were the teachers."

—Rosenthal and Jacobson, "Teacher Expectations for the Disadvantaged" Scientific American, April 1968.

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in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. What purpose did he see in Afro-American history courses? "To get the black children to feel they are worthwhile people. To give them a sense of identity and dignity." Kellock obtained his teaching license last summer. He feels JHS 271 is the most promising place to teach in the entire city.

Teachers Go Sour, Children Lose Interest

David Rogers in his blockbuster of a new book, *"110 Livingston Street: Politics and Bureaucracy in the New York City School System"* quotes an authoritative earlier professional study of the city's schools by Strayer and Yavner. "The greatest failing of the schools today," they found as he did, "is the failure to use the creative ability of teachers." When I read this afterwards, I understood the enthusiasm I had found in the two schools I visited. I had thought of community control as a kind of lesser evil, a way of appeasing black dissatisfaction. I did not realize what a dead hand the bureaucracy has fastened on the schools and how much could be done just by lifting it. "Not many teachers come into the system sour," said Percy Jenkins, the Virginia-born Negro who is now principal of IS 55, "but they don't stay long without becoming sour. The kids come in with lively minds but by the fourth grade they too have lost interest." Jenkins himself, a graduate of West Virginia State College, had been in "the system" 15 years and risen to assistant principal before he was chosen to head IS 55 in this community control experiment. "What you see here," one white teacher explained later, "is a function of the principal, of the fresh directions he maps out and of the commitment brought to this experiment by young liberal arts college volunteers with new ideas."

I spoke with Rhody McCoy, the head of the district; with his assistant, Lloyd Hunter; with the principal of JHS 271, Wm. H. Harris, and with his white assistant principal, John Mandracchia. I have never met a more devoted group of people. All of them are harassed and overworked but sustained by a combination of desperation and joy, desperation because they fear the experiment may soon be wiped out under union pressure, joy in a chance to demonstrate in the little time they have what community control could accomplish. They are enlightened men; one forgets all the nonsense of black and white in talking with them; color vanishes. They fear black extremism as much as white misunderstanding. *And their focus is on the child.*

That cannot be said of their opponents. The child, whether black or white, seems to be the forgotten bystander in the teachers' strike. The Union's rallying cry is "due process", i.e. for teachers and its concern is their tenure. Its alliance is not with the parents for better education but with the employing bureaucracy for the maintenance of their common privileges. The "due process" issue they have raised is a monumental bit of hypocrisy. The best analysis of it may be found in the report by the New York Civil Liberties Union, "The Burden of Blame."

A Prestigious Voice Against The Teachers

"We recognize that the Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy has been made use of by the United Federation of Teachers and the Council of Supervisory Associations and other organized forces of entrenched interests to discredit the possibility of successful, responsible community involvement in the schools within lawful guidelines that protect not only the best interests of professionals in the schools but of the children."

—Statement released Oct. 1 by the prestigious Public Education Association quoted by Nat Hentoff in the Oct. 17 Village Voice, *where he noted that the statement had not appeared in the* New York Times.

The unsatisfactory teachers were *transferred,* not discharged, and transfers normally are made without hearing or charges; the teachers prefer it that way, to keep their records free from blemish.

The real problem is how to keep teachers *in* ghetto schools. The Board of Education regulations are designed to discourage teachers from fleeing them. The contractual procedures between the Board and the Union limit the teacher's freedom to transfer. "Yet," the civil liberties union reported, "in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the UFT sought to ignore all these procedures and claimed the right for unlimited numbers of teachers to transfer out at will for the duration of the experiment, to abandon the experiment for as long as it continues and then to be free to return, presumably when 'normal' conditions had been reinstated. . . . Significant numbers of teachers did leave . . . Months later, when the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Local Governing Board attempted to exercise a similar unilateral right of transfer, the UFT cried foul."

The Board of Education's notions of "due process" are as one-sided. I have read the full text of the decision handed down by Judge Francis E. Rivers as trial examiner in the case of the transformed teachers. It is by no stretch of the imagination the vindication it appears to be in the headlines.

The hearing, by screening out all but professional witnesses, and barring not only parent testimony but that of para-professional school aides, and by applying strict rules of evidence unsuited to administrative procedures, managed to acquit the teachers without any real exploration of the charges against them.

The Board of Education is past master at manipulating regulations and procedures to achieve the ends it seeks. The Rogers book shows how hard it is even for teachers and principals to find out how it operates. Only a Kafka could do justice to the murk it generates. In a column on Due Process in the *New York Post* Oct. 24, Murray Kempton provided an incisive glimpse of these operations in the pro-

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Civil Liberties Union Blames The Teachers Union and The Board of Education

"The current school dispute in New York City has yielded nothing but discontent, disorder, disobedience. The chaos was not a result of local community control. From the beginning the central Board of Education attempted to scuttle the experiment in Ocean Hill-Brownsville by consistently refusing to define the authority of the Local Governing Board. The United Federation of Teachers has used 'due process' as a smoke-screen to obscure its real goal, which is to discredit decentralization, and to sabotage community control.

"Ironically the demand for decentralization or, more properly, community control of the schools began with the failure of the central board to effectively implement integration. Board of Education administrators often said that they could not and would not 'tell the principals how to run their schools.' Integration failed at least partly because it was resisted by many principals, and because the system was already administratively decentralized to the point where recalcitrant principals were not forced to comply with Board policy on integration.

"Integration was not abandoned by black parents but by the Board of Education. The demand for community control was a direct response by ghetto residents to the lack of access to decision-making processes that vitally affected the lives of their children."

—Abridged from The Burden of Blame: A Report on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School Controversy, by the New York Civil Liberties Union, 156 Fifth Ave. NY 10010.

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Sabotaging Community Control as They Sabotaged Desegregation

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ceedings now underway against four JHS 271 teachers accused of threats, or acts of terror, against attempts to reinstate the transferred teachers. Their attorneys were forbidden to see the reports on which the charges were based. When one attorney asked, "Do you proceed under any rules and regulations?" the reply was "We do not." After all this talk about due process, Kempton commented, "we suddenly discover that in this system there is no protection for anybody except the conscience and good-will of the Superintendent."

They Fear Democracy

All bureaucracies are secretive, none more so than the New York Board of Education. The Rogers book is an eye-opener, particularly in its account of how desegregation was sabotaged by the Board. It did not work, Rogers concludes "because the bureaucracy and the staff made them fail." It was out of the frustration created by the failure of integration that black and Puerto Rican parents turned to community control. This, too, is being sabotaged by the Board and by the union. They fear the loss of power and privilege if democracy is substituted for bureaucracy. They have the support of all the unions which do business with the educational system, a billion dollar business. The New York trade union movement, like its educational establishment, has been a stronghold of white supremacy. This is where and how the racial issue arises, and the Jewish community is being enlisted because teaching has been a Jewish preserve in New York as it was once an Irish Catholic preserve. If community control is crushed, the racial struggle will take on more violent and hateful forms to the detriment of both the black and Jewish communities.

The Jews, as the more favored and privileged group, owe the underprivileged a duty of patience, charity and compassion. It will not hurt us to swallow a few insults from overwrought blacks. It is no more wrong to invoke the better Jewish tradition against Jewish bigotry than to invoke the better American tradition against white racism. The genocidal threat, if any, in this situation lies in the slow death and degradation to which so many blacks and Puerto Ricans are doomed in our slums. To wipe out the slums and help save their occupants would be the truest memorial to those who died in Auschwitz. When an idealistic young Mayor and the Rabbi who tried to defend him are howled down in a synagogue, it is time for the slap that can alone bring hysterics to their senses. Lindsay was saying "a Jewish philosopher—" when he was forced to leave. The philosopher he was about to quote was Spinoza. He, too, was thrown out of the synagogue in his time. We ought to have better sense today. *Oct. 29*

No Way To Get Rid of Incompetent Teachers

"Relations between teachers and ghetto parents are severely strained in New York City. The size, the rigidity, and the militaristic nature of the school bureaucracy are one reason . . . Teachers and parents, both victims of this system, have been taking it out on each other, and the ultimate victim is the child. The teachers, frustrated by the board's failure to provide adequate facilities for the so-called 'disruptive child' . . . initially demanded the right to remove these children from their classes . . . Many Negro and Puerto Rican parents were enraged by this demand and countercharged that incompetent and poorly motivated teachers are mainly responsible for the poor education of their children. Both have a point. The board is developing procedures to give better services to children who are judged disruptive, but it has not yet developed adequate procedures to remove, retrain, or supervise more closely incompetent teachers."

—110 Livingston Street *by David Rogers, p. 480.*

*** About three-fourths of the non-striking teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville are white and about one half of these are Jewish.**

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